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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN FACES ONGOING FOOD INSECURITY

REF: DUSHANBE 334

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11. (SBU) Summary: Tajikistan continues to face serious food insecurity. According to the World Food Program (WFP), 1.4 million of Tajikistan's 7 million inhabitants are food insecure, half of them chronically so. The global financial crisis has exacerbated the situation, as have rising food prices and anticipated poor harvests. This year's difficulties come on the heels of last year's ruinous winter, during which many families borrowed or sold off assets to survive. The WFP cautions that continuing food insecurity may pose a serious risk to public health and safety. This in turn could pose a threat to regional stability. End summary.

Aid Agencies Warn: Food Situation Precarious

12. (U) According to the World Food Program (WFP), some 1.4 million rural residents of Tajikistan -- nearly one-third of the country's rural population -- currently faces difficulty getting enough food. Of these, WFP deems 480,000 as severely food insecure, their food intake well below minimum nutritional values. More families are resorting to borrowing or begging to make ends meet. Nearly 70% of those WFP canvassed said they were increasingly forced to ask shopkeepers to extend them credit. Almost 30% of families report switching to less desirable, less expensive foods. This shift in eating practices is seen in family nutrition, with almost one-third of children stunted. Further, as food insecure families seek out less expensive means of feeding themselves they are increasingly using central markets, which has hurt local markets, reducing access to food in remote areas.

Financial Crisis Hits Tajikistan

13. (U) The main factor leading to renewed food insecurity is increased unemployment resulting from the financial crisis, according to surveys conducted by the WFP. Some one million Tajiks work abroad, mostly in Russia, and send home upwards of

\$2 billion each year. Their families back home depend heavily on this money. In 2008, remittances were equivalent to 52% of GDP, by far the highest percentage of any country in the world. In the wake of the global financial crisis, however, remittances have dropped precipitously. Many Tajiks work in the Russian construction sector, which has been particularly hard hit by the crisis: remittances in (month) were down 39% compared to the same month the previous year, and the trend continues to move downward. The loss of overseas jobs represents a one-two punch for the Tajik economy: at the same time many families' income is drying up, returning workers are increasing mouths to feed. 70% of severely food insecure households received much lower remittances over the last three months -- a time of the year when remittances are usually on the rise, according to the WFP.

14. (U) The financial crisis has affected food costs in Tajikistan. After several months of relative stability, prices for basic commodities such as vegetable oil and wheat have risen over the past two months, in some cases by as much as 15%. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that most of Tajikistan's basic food items are imported, mostly from Russia. The recent depreciation of the Tajik somoni against the Russian ruble has thus contributed to the rising prices. (The somoni has devalued even more dramatically against the dollar, which has resulted in other increased living costs, for instance for power.)

15. (U) The government of Tajikistan has responded to the crisis by announcing the creation of over 100,000 new jobs, most of them in the agricultural sector. According to surveys conducted by the WFP, however, these jobs -- if they exist -- are leading to few if any tangible improvements. The vast majority of respondents indicated they are waiting for the financial

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situation to improve in Russia rather than looking for underpaid work in Tajikistan.

Agricultural Damage

16. (U) With only 7% of its land arable and the bulk of its terrain mountainous, Tajikistan is highly vulnerable to climatic and weather variations. This year poor harvests caused by this spring's heavy rains and natural disasters -- including floods, landslides, and hail -- may exacerbate Tajikistan's food insecurity. While the WFP survey went into the field before much of this damage occurred, at a recent donor meeting the United Nations Resident Representative in Tajikistan announced preliminary data showing that heavy rainfall and associated problems had destroyed 22,000 hectares of cotton, 8,000 hectares of cereals, and smaller areas of vegetables and potatoes, and 3,200 head of livestock. Numerous sources report significant but as yet unknown damage to agricultural infrastructure, particularly irrigation canals. Although no concrete data are yet available about this year's harvest, agricultural experts say that this spring's excessive and -- especially -- late rains may cause low yields among many crops, particularly cotton. Despite these concerns, Tajikistan's President Rahmon has predicted a heavy cotton crop.

Ripple Effects: Public Health and Regional Security

17. (SBU) The WFP warns that as a result of decreased income and food security, families have less to spend on health care and medicine, which, combined with poor drinking water, could lead

to a serious degradation of the public health situation. As reported reftel, a relatively small humanitarian crisis in Tajikistan has the potential to become a serious security problem for Central Asia. First, it may drive more Tajik families into the drug trade, helping to smuggle opium across Tajikistan's 1,344-km border with Afghanistan. Second, a large, suddenly-unemployed male population watching its children go hungry may provide willing recruits for anti-regime groups. Indeed, Tajikistan has seen a recent uptick in militant activity in some traditionally anti-regime areas. And chronic and worsening food insecurity quite literally weakens the Tajik people, making Tajikistan more dependent on aid and less able to play a constructive role in this dangerous region.

U.S. Assistance Ending

18. (U) Since 2005, USAID has supported a Multi-Year food Assistance Program (MYAP) in Tajikistan. However, this \$26 million program ends this month. The MYAP was particularly effective because it not only distributed food directly to beneficiaries but also sold a portion on the local market. The proceeds supported important development programs that among other things made further contributions to household food security, teaching villagers how to extend growing seasons with greenhouses, improving food preservations, and supplementing household food stocks through poultry keeping and other activities. MYAP participant households reported having two additional months of food in 2008, compared to the previous year. USAID provided two additional short-term programs in response to last winter's humanitarian crisis: a \$3.5 million Local Resource Procurement Program and a \$5 million Single Year food Assistance Program (SYAP). Both provided immediate benefits to families with very few resources, and built goodwill with participating communities. These programs are scheduled to end by October 2009.

19. (SBU) Comment: Since the fall of 2007, each new season has

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brought rural Tajikistan a new crisis. Families that were still recovering from the brutal winter of 2007-2008 faced a severe drought in 2008, which combined with a large locust attack to reduce harvests. This year's financial crisis and agricultural destruction will further challenge families' ability to replenish their stores in time for winter. In light of this situation, now is a particularly inauspicious time to end food assistance in a strategically vital state neighboring Afghanistan. A new MYAP would be a particularly effective program, because it would allow us to supply food to those in need while achieving a number of other long-term development goals. If a MYAP is not possible, we would recommend that the current SYAP be renewed and paired with other assistance to continue the agricultural, food preservation, health, and education components of a MYAP. Activities should also be implemented that generate income at the local level to help people earn enough money to buy the food that is available. We have an effective model to work from, and are prepared to move quickly, but the window of opportunity to avoid a potentially destabilizing crisis is closing quickly. End Comment.
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